# INSTANCES OF VERBAL FRAUD IN BEN JONSON'S *VOLPONE*.

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**Abstract**

In *Volpone*, the major characters are defined by the language they use and how they use it to influence the beliefs and behaviour of others. Volpone and Mosca exercise their cheating through a carefully controlled dramatisation of their own selves. Their verbal fraud assumes a complex and almost metaphysical quality: these are actors outside and inside the economy of the play. They are players in self-engendered plot. Even if they are finally outwitted by the course of events, they are still authorial figures. These and other occurrences of wilful verbal deceit in the play and the different roles they play in Jonson's strategy of satire are analysed below.

**Resumo**

Em *Volpone*, as personagens principais definem-se pela linguagem utilizada e pela forma como a usam para influenciar os comportamentos alheios. Volpone e Mosca praticam as suas fraudes recorrendo a uma cuidadosa dramatização de si mesmos. Esta fraude verbal apresenta características complexas e quase metafísicas: trata-se aqui de actores dentro e fora da peça, que representam um enredo por eles criado. Mesmo sendo finalmente derrotados pelo curso da história, continuam a ser figuras autoriais. Estas e outras ocorrências de fraudes verbais deliberadas e os diferentes papéis que estes desempenham nas estratégias satíricas de Jonson são aqui analisadas.

It is usually agreed that, in Ben Jonson's satirical plays, the plot corresponds to the sum of the different characters and respective rhetoric devices displayed by them (Bamborough, 1959, p. 17; Bradbrook [1955] 1962, p. 107). These characters inhabit a fictional world that presents concatenated scenes, rather than a universe ruled by clear cause-effect sequences. Nevertheless, this apposition of interrelated scenes does not correspond, in the least, to a loose or unstable narrative thread (Barish [1960] 1967, pp. 79, 80): the capacity to transform amalgamated episodes into a compelling and energetic tale is one of the marks of Jonson's style. This cohesion, which is essential to an intricate array of conspiracies like the one found in *Volpone*, is mostly obtained because of the way language is used.

This characteristic of Jonson's writing presents direct relevance to the issue here at stake. These scenes mark the different spheres where all the characters seem to move – and which only at times intersect each other. In fact, for most of these characters, language constitutes their way of construing plots of their own (Watson, 1987, p. 2; Donaldson, 2000, p. 122), as well as a more or less effective tool for seducing others into participating in them. The fact that some of these people achieve their aims throughout the play and almost to its end, whereas others systematically behave as pawns in a chess game devised by someone else, marks the linguistic superiority of the former and the lesser linguistic resources of the latter. Also, this vitality of language lends the play the rhythm, brilliance and intensity that, consensually, seem to characterize it.

One of the factors that decisively contribute to the linguistic charge inherent to this play lies, undoubtedly, in the characters' names. The naming of people after the names of beasts – although not exclusive of this particular author nor of this specific play - constitutes, as the metaphorical device it can be, an economical form of immediately defining the character at stake and, more importantly, the kind of behaviour that can, therefore, be expected of it. In the present play, a number of semantic possibilities are allowed by a discerning choice of more or less ambiguous names (Barton [1984] 2001, p. 421). In this way, two plans can be effectively conflated: everywhere, human greed in all its

forms is served by animal cunning (Wayne [1982] 2000, p. 36; Dutton, 2000, p. 66). As we have seen, what varies in this constant – human / animal - is the expertise (or lack of it) revealed by each of these characters in the translation of their specific strategies into words, i.e. the transition of individually imagined plots to the world where the playwright has chosen to place them.

In this process of naming, the higher hierarchical position occupied by the authorial instance is made obvious. In fact, the full significance of the Italian names attributed to the characters seems to be meaningful only to the arch plotters, i.e. Volpone, Mosca, and, obviously, the author himself – and, in the case of the first two, this kind of clairvoyance does not come to their help at all times. The rest of the other characters appear to be blinded by the linguistic barrier as to the true nature of those who attempt to seduce them (Barton [1986] 2001, p. 421): nowhere are Corbaccio, Corvino, and Voltore aware that they are being deceived by a Fox and a Flesh-fly. Because of this inability to see and hear, as they should, they are incapable of anticipating the plot moves prepared by the other two. As in the fable that partly originated the play, in the case of this threesome, greed completely supersedes intelligence and cunning – which is a characteristic their own names aptly indicates, for those who can hear properly. Therefore, character naming in this play fulfils a number of functions that work in different manners, depending on whether each character can read proper names as the icons they are.

For those men who are able to effect that recognition in the play, names also represent an added opportunity for displays of linguistic creativity: Volpone and Mosca embroider their dialogues and monologues with intertwined English and Italian versions of the deceived characters' names, where the real nature of the dupe at stake comes forward with the utmost immediacy:

> MOSCA. (...) 'Tis signor Voltore, the
> advocate:
> I know him by his knock.
> VOLPONE. Fetch me my gown,
> My furs, and night-caps; say, my couch is changing,
> And let him entertain himself awhile
> Without i' the gallery [*Exit* MOSCA] Now, now my clients
> Begin their visitation! Vulture, kite,
> Raven, and gor-crow, all my birds of prey,
> That think me turning carcass, now they come;
> I am not for them yet.
> (Act 1, Scene 2)

As to Sir Peregrine's interpretations of the behaviour of Lord and Lady Would-Be – excessive though they will prove to be – they are also based on a reading of their names, which embody ambitious social aspirations and mimicry of other people's habits. Here's an example of his reading of Sir Pol's name:

> SIR POLITIC. Pray you, what news, sir, vents our
> climate?
> I heard last night a most strange thing reported
> By some of my lord's followers, and I long
> To hear how 'twill be seconded.
> PEREGRINE. What was't, sir?
> SIR POLITIC. Marry, sir, of a raven that should build
> In a ship royal of the king's.
> PEREGRINE. This fellow,
> Does he gull me, trow? Or is gulled? – Your name, sir?
> SIR POLITIC. My name is Politic Would-be.
> PEREGRINE. [*aside*] O, that speaks him – (...)
> (Act II, Scene 1)

Yet another instance: during one of the numerous turns of the screw in the play, the Avocatori wonder how they should rename Mosca, now apparently paramount to a Magnifico. However, even if they are able to recognise in an abstract way that names should match the qualities of those who bear them, they don't seem to be able to deduct that a character at present named 'Mosca' must certainly have done something to deserve it.

When it comes to characters' names, only in Volpone's and Mosca's references to the gullible would-be inheritors, paradoxical as it may seem (after all, we are dealing here with two artists of deceit), language refers a true reality, as opposed to the fictional universes that are constantly being concocted and dismantled. When it comes to the numerous plots weaved by most of them, language becomes a means of creating virtual possibilities of story development and, what is most important, a means of enticing others into participating in them willingly. This means that language is not only a form of shaping our own plots, but making other people believe that our plot is theirs as well. This is what repeatedly happens with the plans of characters such as Corvino, Corbaccio and Voltore. Everything Mosca and Volpone hint and suggest to these characters – strange as it may sound to them at first – is finally integrated in their mental schemata (Cook, 1989, p. 69; Semino, 1997, p. 156 *et passim*), so as to make perfect sense in the plots they have devised and which benefit them.

Volpone and Mosca – and especially the latter – assume the guise of *metteurs-en-scène* of the plays other characters think they themselves are writing and starring. They appear under the light of companions in the trips of the mind others are eager to undertake (Carvalho Homem, 2002, p. 28). In this way, the two effectively hide their true status of mastermind plotters – a status that will be also finally denied to them when the rug is pulled from under their feet in the final scenes by the true authorial figure (Watson, 1987, p. 82). This is the reason why Volpone and Mosca are successful throughout the play until the bitter end. Their mastery of language enables them to adhere so completely to the worlds of others that an appearance of unity of purpose is achieved. This is what finally makes these two so unsuspected and so convincing.

One of the strategies used by them for this purpose is encased in the type of language they commonly resort to when dealing with those they want to deceive. It has been noticed that the language of Jonson's plays appears complex and hard when compared to the flowing syntax that can be found in some his contemporary playwrights (Barish [1960] 1967, p. 39). However, this Romanising tendency, as it has been called (idem, p. 71), while often making the sentence hard to decipher in writing, makes it closer to the abstruse and sometimes illogical syntax of colloquial speech. When spoken aloud – as the lines of a theatrical play are naturally meant to be – those sentences spoken by the plotters present the true ring of sincerity. They sound totally spontaneous and unprepared when in conversation with the would-be inheritors. Volpone and Mosca feed their hopes while throwing them off-balance. A discourse that presented too much coherence and logical organization could easily make them suspect stratagems and conspiracies. As it sounds, it is energetic, vivacious and lively – and highly convincing. It is also a form of breaching the distance implied in more formal types of discourse: the marks of oral speech and the disjunctive syntax bring increased intimacy, which can be – and effectively is, in this case – confused with identity of purposes and aims.

In the episode of the mountebank, language is articulated in a more logical manner: it clearly obeys to an underlying strategy of seduction of those that might be hearing it. Therefore, it resorts to the kind of devices that are normally guaranteed to convince the *general* public: flattering the public's vanity and the public's ears with inflated and embellished words.

In both instances, the intention is criminal. However, the histrionic qualities of the major tricksters are foregrounded in different types of performances: it might be suggested that Mosca is the master of a personalised type of flattery, which thrives on an assumed intimacy with the person he wants to deceive. This is obviously the case with the prospective inheritors of Volpone's fortune, but also the case with Volpone himself. As to Volpone, he excels in public displays of adroit handling of language, such as the mountebank scene (idem, p. 143). Naturally, when there is a vast audience, it becomes more difficult to maintain a firm grasp on the public's reaction. Two of the people that are listening to him symbolise the two possibilities of interpretation open to Volpone's – or Scoto de Mantua's – audience. There will be those who will be fooled by the speaker's apparent wide knowledge about medical subjects and expert use of rhetorical devices:

> VOLPONE. To fortify the most indigest and crude stomach, ay, were it of one that, through extreme weakness, vomited blood, applying only a warm napkin to the place, after the unction or fricace; for the vertigine in the head, putting but a drop into your nostrils, likewise behind the ears; a most sovereign and approved remedy: the mal caduco, cramps, convulsions, paralyses, epilepsies, tremor cordia, retired nerves, ill vapours of the spleen, stoppings of the liver, the stone, the strangury, hernia ventosa, ilica passio; stops a dysenteria immediately; easeth the torsion of the small guts, and cures melancholia hypocondriaca, being taken and applied, according to my printed receipt. [Pointing to his bill and his vial.] For, this is the physician, this is the medicine; this counsels, this cures; this gives the direction, this works the effect; and, in sum, both together may be termed an abstract of the theoric and practic in the Æsculapian art. (...)
>
> (Act II, Scene 2)

That is the case with Sir Politic Would-Be. Another part of the public will certainly be able to see through the linguistic veil that carefully disguises the dishonest intentions of the charlatan. This is what happens with Sir Peregrine, who, even if he is discerning and sensible when it comes to the real value of the words being said to him – even to a fault, at times – is deceived by another form of non-verbal language: make-up and clothes. In their character of elements that convey information about the person's social status, beliefs and behaviour, they can be added to verbal language so as to signify the whole of the character.

Several instances from the play can be provided as to the 'paralinguistic' importance of this outer crust in the definition of the character at stake and as a form of providing the physical relays of an otherwise mostly linguistic type of fraud. Therefore, we can refer the frequently assumed mien of illness assumed by Volpone, which includes nightgown, drawn looks, absence of speech and signs of bodily affliction, as befits a man on the verge of death; or his assumption of an entirely different character, as in the mountebank episode, or when he deliberately disguises himself so as to be able to be closer to the dupes and have fun with their delusions and disillusions. The character that relies on this type of fraud – who, in fact, makes it a second skin – while the others cast off and assume different disguises according to their needs – is Lady Would-Be. It can be said that she has to rely on outward appearance to deceive others because she is incapable of doing it linguistically. Her made-up face and Venetian-like attires are not matched by a command of the proper language for the part: her ways of speaking and outlandish vocabulary merely mimic a savoir-faire and urbanity that she clearly does not possess. In the composition of this character, fraud – albeit of a very naïf kind - becomes obvious and ludicrous, not just because of the situations created but mainly because of her bad performance as an 'Actress Would-be'.

Although her husband, Sir Pol, is also shown under the light of an ineffectual performer because of his linguistic shortcomings, frequent misunderstandings and inflated words, Lady Would-be's characterisation implies criticism beyond that which is caused by her

wish to establish herself as yet another inheritor to Volpone's fortune. In fact, the theme of the painted woman can be seen to embody the Elizabethan *topos* of the deceitful female figure that adulterates her true nature with the aid of artifice (Carvalho Homem, 2001, p. 61). Lady Would-be's artificial nature is all the more evident when compared with the character that presents the most antithetical relationship to her, i.e. Celia, Corvino's wife. Her naturalness and simplicity are, in this case, to be taken literally: she appears to be honest and sincere because, in fact, she has nothing criminal to hide. It is one of the play's ironies that she is the one accused of 'meretricious' behaviour on those grounds by her own husband. Celia's language – as well as Bonario's, Corbaccio's son – reveals nothing more than honesty, which, sadly for them, is not as convincing as the skilfully crafted words of the two consummated artists in the play.

It is the mark of a true actor to be able to embody someone else's soul so fully that we will almost believe this person to be another. In this play, as we have seen, deception needs theatrical props to be convincing. Different clothes and painted faces are sometimes necessary: however, without the language of seduction, mere outward disguises are readily seen through. The dupes rely too much on outward appearance: because they use it to deceive others, they will believe in it when it is used against them.

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